

Marshall Memo 146

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 24, 2006

In This Issue:

1. Classroom assessments as a key change lever (an oldie but goodie article)
2. Ten ways for a principal to be a staff developer (another oldie but goodie)
3. Valuable work, necessary work, and waste work (yet another oldie but goodie)

Quotes of the Week

“A growing body of work has shown that the quality of education offered to students varies widely within all school categories. The public, private, charter and religious realms all contain schools that range from good to not so good to downright horrendous.”

New York Times editorial July 19, 2006

“The goal of a school is to create *learning*.”

Kenneth Freeston and Jonathan Costa (see item #3)

“[F]rom an educational consumer’s point of view, if something is taught and not learned, does it really matter that it was taught?”

Freeston and Costa (*ibid.*)

“The worst scenario is one in which some pupils who get low marks this time also got low marks last time and come to expect to get low marks next time. This cycle of repeated failure becomes part of a shared belief between such students and their teacher.”

Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (see item #1)

“Rallying support for a realistic, credible, attractive vision of what the school might become is part of the daily work of principals.”

Richard DuFour and Timothy Berkey (see item #2)

“If those within the school believe that the causes of student learning lie outside their spheres of influence – in the genes or social background of their students – school improvement efforts will be viewed as futile, if not ridiculous.”

DuFour and Berkey (*ibid.*)

“Most importantly, principals must not mistake congeniality with collegiality. They must strive to create a culture in which teachers talk about teaching and learning; observe each other teach; plan, design, research, and evaluate the curriculum; and teach each other what they have learned about their craft.”

DuFour and Berkey (*ibid.*)

1. Classroom Assessments As a Key Change Lever (an oldie but goodie)

In this highly influential article in the October 1998 issue of *Kappan*, British professors Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam discuss the evidence from 250 research studies on formative assessment and argue that when teachers use minute-by-minute, day-by-day assessments to check for understanding – and follow up by adapting instruction to clear up their students’ confusions and misunderstandings – they are on the road to getting high achievement from all their students. In fact, argue Black and Wiliam, this is a better way of raising standards than external programs, and is the most powerful engine for closing the achievement gap.

Black and Wiliam don’t think most school reform efforts pay enough attention to what goes on inside the classroom, treating it as a “black box” and assuming that the pressure of high-stakes tests will be enough to get teachers to improve learning. “[I]t seems strange, even unfair,” they argue, “to leave the most difficult piece of the standards-raising puzzle entirely to teachers. If there are ways in which policy makers and others can give direct help and support to the everyday classroom task of achieving better learning, then surely these ways ought to be pursued vigorously.” Black and Wiliam are on a mission to understand what goes on inside the “black box” and provide research support for teachers’ best efforts. Here are their major points:

- *Formative assessments are a highly effective way to raise student achievement.* Black and Wiliam say the research supports this conclusion for students from kindergarten to college, in different subject areas, and in different countries. Effect sizes range from 0.4 to 0.7, which is higher than most other educational interventions. Interestingly, formative assessments have their most positive effect on low-achieving students and therefore narrow the achievement gap.

But the authors admit that it’s not a simple matter to implement classroom assessments well. Research indicates that effective use of assessments depends on teachers making significant changes in classroom practice, modifying instruction based on formative data, getting students actively involved in the process, and using these assessments – and students’ self-assessments – to improve motivation and self-esteem.

- *Classroom assessments are often problematic.* Teachers have a strong tendency to teach, test, and move on with the curriculum – without using classroom data to adjust instruction or help struggling students. “Marking is usually conscientious but often fails to offer guidance on how work can be improved,” said a U.K. inspection report. “Information about pupil performance received by the teacher is insufficiently used to inform subsequent work.” There are several other problems with the way many teachers use classroom assessments:

- Many classroom tests measure rote and superficial learning even when teachers are trying to develop understanding; often teachers seem unaware of the inconsistency.
- Teachers seldom share their classroom assessments with their colleagues; without critical scrutiny, many of these tests are not high-quality.
- “For primary teachers particularly,” say Black and Wiliam, “there is a tendency to emphasize quantity and presentation of work and to neglect its quality in relation to learning.”
- Some teachers use tests for social and managerial purposes, rather than to diagnose students’ learning needs or give useful advice; when this happens, the impact on low-achieving students can be quite negative.
- Some teachers use classroom assessments to foster competition and compare students to one another; this can lead low-achieving students to believe that they lack “ability” and can’t learn.
- Some teachers use classroom tests to predict students’ performance on external tests, rather than to diagnose their students’ learning needs.
- Some teachers don’t pay attention to the assessment records of students’ previous teachers.

Black and Wiliam then list a number of ways that schools can improve the use of formative assessments:

- *Assessment feedback to students should be about the particular qualities of their work, accompanied by advice on how to improve it, and should not compare students to each other.* “When the classroom culture focuses on rewards, ‘gold stars,’ grades, or class ranking,” write Black and Wiliam, “then pupils look for ways to obtain the best marks rather than to improve their learning.” This leads students to avoid difficult tasks for fear of not being successful and losing points. Students who don’t do well come to believe that they lack innate ability and can’t do anything about that. They tend to avoid investing effort in learning, are content to “get over,” and build up their self-esteem in other arenas.

Effective use of formative assessments reverses this negative culture. The message to students is that their failures are temporary and can be fixed by effective effort. Classrooms that use assessments in this way have a culture of success, backed by a belief that all students can achieve. This dynamic is especially helpful for low-achieving students because the focus is on the specific problems they are having with their work and what they can do to improve.

- *Self-assessment by students is an essential component of formative assessment.* “When anyone is trying to learn,” say Black and Wiliam, “feedback about effort has three elements: recognition of the *desired goal*, evidence about *present position*, and some understanding of a *way to close the gap* between the two. All three must be understood to some degree by anyone before he or she can take action to improve learning.” First and foremost, students need to have a clear picture of what they are supposed to be learning. “Surprisingly and sadly,” continue the authors, “many pupils do not have such a picture, and they appear to have become accustomed to receiving classroom teaching as an arbitrary sequence of exercises

with no overarching rationale. To overcome this pattern of passive reception requires hard and sustained work. When pupils do acquire such an overview, they then become more committed and more effective as learners.”

• *Teachers need to build in opportunities for students to communicate their evolving understanding as a unit unfolds – and give them adequate wait-time to respond.* Effective teachers plan open-ended questions, classroom tasks, and homework assignments that develop and assess student understanding of the big ideas and details of the unit in real time. Master teachers are also alert to unexpected student responses. Less effective teachers tend to listen for the “right” answer and, quite unconsciously, respond in ways that signal that there’s only one answer and the students’ job is to figure it out and give it back. “Over time,” say Black and Wiliam of this pattern, “the pupils get the message: they are not required to think out their own answers. The object of the exercise is to work out – or guess – what answer the teacher expects to see or hear.”

When teachers ask questions and don’t give students enough time to think through their answers (providing answers to their own questions or moving quickly on to another student), two things happen: the questions tend to become low-level, with simple answers; and the classroom “dialogue” tends to take place between the teacher and a few students who are good at giving rapid-fire answers to a succession of questions. “So the teacher,” say Black and Wiliam, “by lowering the level of questions and by accepting answers from a few, can keep the lesson going but is actually out of touch with the understanding of most of the class. The question/answer dialogue becomes a ritual, one in which thoughtful involvement suffers.”

Black and Wiliam suggest a number of ways to break out of this pattern:

- Giving students time to think after asking a question;
- Asking students to discuss their thinking in pairs or small groups, so that a respondent is speaking on behalf of others;
- Giving students a choice between different possible answers and asking them to vote on the options;
- Asking all students to write down an answer and then reading out a selected few.

“What is essential,” say Black and Wiliam, “is that any dialogue should evoke thoughtful reflection in which all pupils can be encouraged to take part, for only then can the formative process start to work.”

• *Teachers need to get the most out of classroom tests.* Tests should be opportunities for learning, insist Black and Wiliam. “It is better to have frequent short tests than infrequent long ones. Any new learning should first be tested within about a week of a first encounter...” Generating good test items that are relevant to the main learning aims and communicate clearly with students is difficult, say Black and Wiliam – which is a strong reason for teachers to collaborate and draw on outside sources.

Equally important is the quality of feedback that students get after a test. “Research studies have shown that, if pupils are given only marks or grades, they do not benefit from the feedback,” say Black and Wiliam. “Feedback has been shown to improve learning when it gives each pupil specific guidance on strengths and weaknesses, preferably without any overall

marks... Pupils must be given the means and opportunities to work with evidence of their difficulties.”

“The worst scenario,” say Black and Wiliam, “is one in which some pupils who get low marks this time also got low marks last time and come to expect to get low marks next time. This cycle of repeated failure becomes part of a shared belief between such students and their teacher.”

• *It’s quite challenging for teachers to implement formative assessments well.* Some students will resist this change from the familiar classroom routine. Being asked to think for oneself and take responsibility for self-assessment is difficult. In addition, using formative assessments takes more classroom time at first. It’s a leap of faith for many teachers to make these changes – but it will produce wider and deeper learning in the long run.

Teachers need to deal with two other issues if they are serious about using formative assessments. The first is their theory of action about how students learn. If a teacher has bought into the transmission model of teaching, namely...

- Knowledge is transmitted by the teacher and learned by the student;
- Understanding will develop later;
- Clarity of exposition accompanied by rewards for patient reception are the essentials of good teaching

... then that teacher will not see the point of formative assessments. Fortunately most teachers have moved past the transmission model and know that teacher-student interaction is vital for learning to take place. These teachers should be receptive to improving their continuous assessment of student learning.

A second possible barrier arises when teachers have doubts about the potential of all their students to learn. There are two polarities:

- The “fixed intelligence” view – a belief that each student has a fixed, inherited intelligence that cannot be altered much by schooling;
- The “untapped potential” view – a belief that starts with the assumption that so-called ability is a complex of skills that can be learned.

Formative assessments are most useful for teachers who hold the second belief – who operate on the assumption that “all pupils can learn more effectively if one can clear away, by sensitive handling, the obstacles to learning, be they cognitive failures never diagnosed or damage to personal confidence or a combination of the two.” The “untapped potential” approach helps all students learn better, and has its most powerful impact on students who have previously struggled in school.

At the end of their article, Black and Wiliam express hope that these ideas on formative assessment will spread by a small number of schools piloting and developing them, then reach more schools through dissemination of best practices, with principals and teachers working to reduce the obstacles that now exist in many schools. “The chief negative influence here,” they say, “is that of short external tests. Such tests can dominate teachers’ work, and, insofar as they encourage drilling to produce right answers to short, out-of-context questions, they can lead

teachers to act against their own better judgment about the best ways to develop the learning of their pupils.”

The key, say Black and Wiliam, is for teachers to be clear about the distinction between formative and summative tests and treat formative assessments as a low-stakes learning experience for their students and themselves. This, they conclude, is the most powerful way to raise the achievement of all students – especially disadvantaged students – on high-stakes summative tests and close the achievement gap.

“Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment” by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam in *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 1998 (Vol. 80 #2, p. 139-148), <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kbla9810.htm>

2. Ten Ways a Principal Can Be a Staff Developer (an oldie but goodie)

In this incisive article from the *Journal of Staff Development's* Fall 1995 issue, Rick DuFour and his Illinois high-school colleague Timothy Berkey outline the ways principals can promote the professional growth and development of their staffs. “Focusing on people is the most effective way to change any organization,” they write. “All too often, school improvement efforts focus on a search for the magic bullet – the new programs and procedures that will transform a school. New curriculum materials, alternative scheduling, new methods of reporting student achievement, for example, are heralded as examples of significant school improvement. It is time to recognize that there is no magic bullet. Programs and materials do not bring about change; people do.” Here is DuFour’s and Berkey’s list of suggestions for principals:

- *Create consensus on a vision for the school's future.* To alter the professional practices, beliefs, and understandings of school personnel, the principal has to have a clear and compelling vision in mind – and persuade staff to buy into that vision. “Rallying support for a realistic, credible, attractive vision of what the school might become is part of the daily work of principals,” write DuFour and Berkey.

- *Identify, promote, and protect shared values.* Values are the means by which a school reaches its vision, say the authors. Values carry the message of common purpose and agreed-upon standards to which teachers and administrators hold themselves on a daily basis. For example, if the school’s long-range vision is for all students to be proficient, the value statement might be, “We will provide evidence that each student has been successful in achieving the agreed-upon essential outcomes of our course.”

- *Monitor the critical elements of the school improvement effort.* “One of the most powerful means by which principals can convey the importance of something to those within the school is simply by paying attention to it,” say DuFour and Berkey. “A principal who devotes considerable time and effort to the continual assessment of a particular condition within a school sends the message that the condition is important.” This means that for any professional development program that affects classroom teaching, the principal should monitor whether teachers have acquired the skill, had enough time to practice it, are using it in their classrooms, and, most important, whether it’s having an impact on student achievement.

• *Ensure systematic collaboration throughout the school.* “Teacher isolation is such an inherent part of traditional school practice that merely encouraging teachers to collaborate is not enough,” write DuFour and Berkey. The principal needs to schedule grade-level and course team meetings, require attendance, model collaboration in their own dealings with colleagues, and ask teams for periodic updates on the results of their work as they develop curriculum outcomes, conduct interim assessments of student achievement, choose instructional materials, plan special projects, participate in peer observation and coaching, pursue professional growth topics, and develop schedules. “Most importantly,” caution DuFour and Berkey, “principals must not mistake congeniality with collegiality. They must strive to create a culture in which teachers talk about teaching and learning; observe each other teach; plan, design, research, and evaluate the curriculum; and teach each other what they have learned about their craft.”

• *Encourage experimentation.* “A key to school improvement is persuading people to approach their jobs from a different perspective and try out new techniques and strategies,” write DuFour and Berkey. If teachers get their heads bitten off when an innovation fails, the spirit of experimentation will quickly die. Principals need to get out the word that it’s all right to try something and learn from failures and mistakes.

• *Model a commitment to professional growth.* If they expect teachers to grow continuously, school leaders need to model the way. Three fertile areas for principals’ own development are learning more about: team building, achieving consensus, and using technology. School leaders can also set an example by participating in study groups, forwarding good articles to staff members and asking for their comments, making presentations at conferences, writing articles, and engaging in action research based on student learning data from their schools.

• *Provide one-on-one staff development.* Sometimes the most effective staff development happens one teacher at a time. Classroom supervision (often regarded as ineffective and unproductive) has great potential if principals use it skillfully to give teachers detailed feedback on their efforts. Good supervision can also serve as an opening wedge for peer observation.

• *Provide staff development programs that are purposeful and research-based.* Programs need to be well-aligned with the school’s mission and values, but that’s not enough. Research has shown that professional development works best when:

- The theory of action behind the innovation is presented;
- The innovation is demonstrated;
- Teachers get initial practice in the training session;
- Teachers get prompt feedback on their efforts;
- Teachers get coaching – sustained practice with ongoing feedback and support – until they master the skill.

• *Promote individual and organizational self-efficacy.* “The willingness of teachers to put forth the effort and energy required to learn and implement a new skill or strategy depends to a great extent upon their sense of self-confidence and belief in their ability to affect their

classrooms,” write DuFour and Berkey. “This sense of efficacy is also critical to schoolwide improvement efforts. If those within the school believe that the causes of student learning lie outside their spheres of influence – in the genes or social background of their students – school improvement efforts will be viewed as futile, if not ridiculous. Therefore, it is important that principals help teachers recognize and believe in their individual and collective capacity to bring about change that benefits students.” A vital part of this, say DuFour and Berkey, is for the principal to gather data on the impact of staff development initiatives and publicly celebrate indicators of student improvement.

- *Stay the course.* “Programs are often based on ‘this year’s new thing’ rather than a clear, compelling vision of the school’s future,” write DuFour and Berkey. “When teachers are introduced to cooperative learning one year, multiple intelligences in the next, and portfolio assessment in the next, it is inevitable that they will respond to pronouncements of new programs with an attitude that suggests, ‘this too shall pass.’... If professional growth initiatives are to be effective, principals must abandon the potpourri approach to staff development and support ongoing, purposeful learning until there is evidence that the learning is having the desired impact on the school.” All staff also need to recognize that improvement is a continual process, not something that’s ever completed.

“The Principal As Staff Developer” by Richard DuFour and Timothy Berkey in *Journal of Staff Development*, Fall 1995 (Vol. 16, #4, p. 2-6), no e-link available

3. Valuable Work, Necessary Work, and Waste Work (an oldie but goodie)

In this insightful article from the April 1998 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Connecticut educators Kenneth Freeston and Jonathan Costa note the frustration that many school leaders feel about not spending enough time on activities that affect teaching and learning. This chronic time management problem produces three common reactions: wishing there were more hours in the day; believing that “just getting organized” will lead to more efficient use of time; and thinking that being busy is the same as being productive.

These are understandable reactions, say Freeston and Costa, but none of them go to the heart of the matter. The solution, they say, is using the time we have more wisely. But how? The work of business expert William Conway is instructive (1992). Conway spent 20 years working with corporate leaders on using their time more thoughtfully, and found that the first step is coming to a shared understanding of what *value* is. In the business world, value is a product or service the customer is willing to pay for.

Having defined value, Conway divided the daily work of a corporate leader into three categories:

- *Value-added work* produces things that the customer wants; the value of the work is greater than the work itself.
- *Waste work* is time spent on things that the customer will *not* pay for – errors, rework, problems, redundancies.

- *Necessary work* is time spent on things that an organization must do to function, but that have no direct value to the customer.

Conway's studies revealed that the average corporate leader spends 40 percent of the time doing waste work. Effective leaders, on the other hand, "do not allow waste to accumulate. They systematically teach their employees to eliminate waste and streamline necessary work in order to maximize the time spent on value-added work."

Can this construct be applied to school leadership? The first challenge is defining value. "Business leaders have it easy when it comes to defining their primary goal," say Freeston and Costa. "They sell stuff. With education, it may seem more ambiguous, but it is nonetheless certain: The goal of a school is to create *learning*." From that starting point, it's possible to transpose Conway's three kinds of work to schools:

- *Value-added work* is any activity that leads directly to improvements in student learning, for example:

- Research on effective instructional practices;
- Observing and supporting classroom learning;
- Keeping professional dialogue focused on learning.

- *Waste work* is any activity that doesn't contribute to learning and could have been avoided if it had been done properly the first time, for example:

- Correcting one's own mistakes or those of others;
- Dealing with teacher, parent, or student complaints;
- Conducting a meeting without the right people present.

- *Necessary work* is any activity that keeps the school running but has no direct impact on learning, for example:

- Signing purchase orders;
- Ordering supplies;
- Supervising bus duty.

Freeston and Costa say the principal's challenge is reducing waste, improving efficiency, and aligning the work of the school with its primary goal. Sounds simple, right? Not so much! They go right to the thorniest issue: teaching. "The value of teaching is equivalent to the learning it creates," they write. "To anyone who purports that teaching has intrinsic value, we say yes it does – to the extent that it creates learning. After all, from an educational consumer's point of view, if something is taught and not learned, does it really matter that it was taught?" This creates a high bar for principals as they analyze how much of their daily work is truly value-added.

How can a principal get an accurate sense of the proportion of time spent on value-added work? Freeston and Costa did studies in which they beeped school leaders at random intervals and had them write down what kind of activity they were engaged in at that moment – value-added, waste, or necessary work. Principals found that after jotting down their activities for 5 to 7 weeks (about 800 entries), value-added work made up only 10-20 percent of their time. They were horrified, and began looking much more critically at whether certain activities were really contributing to improved student learning.

Principals in the studies zeroed in on two arenas with a lot of waste work: school governance council meetings and faculty meetings (Freeston and Costa said the latter are often “a dead zone of value-added work”). With their new consciousness, principals became much more aggressive about pre-screening agenda items for direct links to student learning, distributing necessary work, and driving out waste by implementing problem-solving and group-facilitation strategies.

Freeston and Costa then had school leaders in their studies calculate their VQ – value quotient. This is the amount of value-added work divided by the amount of waste work (assuming a reasonably efficient percent of necessary work – less than 40 percent of each week). It turned out that a VQ of 1.0 was a threshold:

- Principals with a greater than one-to-one ratio of value-added to waste work “feel a great sense of worth and pride in their work.”
- Principals with less than a one-to-one ratio “tend to be numb to innovation, suspicious of new ideas, dispassionate toward improvement, and not willing to find challenge in their work. A cycle of chronically low VQ is characteristic of burnout.”

In short, the challenge of every school leader is increasing the proportion of time spent on value-added work, doing necessary work as quickly and efficiently as possible, and cutting down on waste work. Freeston and Costa have found that when principals are successful in moving in this direction, there is a ripple effect in the school. When school leaders improve their value quotient, the VQ of their staff improves as well, resulting in fewer grievances, lower absenteeism, less resistance to academic initiatives, and better morale, motivation, and performance. VQ, they believe, “is an excellent measure of an educational institution’s ability to grow and sustain itself.”

“Making Time for Valuable Work” by Kenneth Freeston and Jonathan Costa in *Educational Leadership*, April 1998 (Vol. 55, #7, p. 50-52), no e-link available

© Copyright 2006 Kim Marshall

Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 36 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through scores of articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the memo to subscribers every Monday (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2004-05).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are \$50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

Website:

If you go to <http://www.marshallmemo.com> you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- Why the Marshall Memo?
- Focus topics
- Headlines for all issues
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Boston Globe
CommonWealth Magazine
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Jimmy Kilpatrick
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
Theory Into Practice
Times Educational Supplement